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Stuck to a tar baby

The CIA and some journalists have forgotten a painful lesson in a remarkably short time. The lesson, learned in the examination of covert activities that followed the Watergate affair, is this: Reporters should not be working as contacts for the CIA. Nothing is going to happen to change it.

CIA Director Stansfield Turner said last week that three American news correspondents had agreed — since the lesson was learned — to be CIA informants. But even though Turner said the CIA did not tap the reporters as sources of information, the credibility of the press was again compromised through an association with the U.S. intelligence establishment. The CIA tar baby, once touched, is awfully hard to pull free from.

The CIA set a policy three years ago against the use of correspondents as agents. Turner changed that policy — in a development the press apparently overlooked. He claims reporters would be used as CIA contacts only in exceptional situations after he had given his personal approval. But his assurances aren't enough. If Turner doesn't reinstate the policy against using reporters as contacts, the credibility of the media will be permanently damaged.

The foreign correspondent has a special role to play in a troubled corner of the world. When trouble strikes, he is sometimes the only person to whom the world can listen with any assurance that it is hearing the truth. His credibility is vital.

Sometimes the dispatches of foreign correspondents are a much better insight into chaos than the measured pronouncements of the U.S. State Department. Such is the case in El Salvador, where political killing is a daily occurrence and a perplexed U.S. government can't seem to come up with any better policy than to keep sending money to a military junta that reportedly condones the killing of its subjects.

What of situations in which U.S. government policy has been found wanting? Vietnam comes to mind. Would readers and viewers of the news feel confident that they were hearing the truth if they knew the U.S. government might have foreign correspondents on its payroll?

Despots don't need reasons to throw correspondents out of their countries when news reports start to rankle. But Stansfield Turner has given them a valid excuse for banning American reporters from their countries.

Turner claims that journalists don't need policies to protect their ethics and wouldn't lose their freedom to report if they were to accept an assignment from the CIA. He doesn't understand the issue. It is one of credibility, not one of whether ethics are being breached or rights are being threatened.